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ABSTRACT

These guidelines have been designed to guide English teachers in taking steps to eliminate sexism from the English classroom. Separate sections define sexism, examine ways that language works to perpetuate sexism, show how literature works to perpetuate sexism, and list frequently used terms that are sexist in nature or use, along with nonsexist alternatives. The guidelines include exercises to help students become more aware of sex bias in society, in speech, and in literature, and a checklist that students may use in analyzing literature for sexist content. (GW)

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COMMISSION ON SEXISM GUIDELINES FOR ENGLISH TEACHERS

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COMMISSION ON SEXISM GUIDELINES FOR ENGLISH TEACHERS

Equal treatment of the sexes has become a growing concern in our society, and many changes in law and behavior have already been accomplished. English teachers, as spokespersons for the humanities and as teachers of languages and its important effects have a special responsibility to become aware of sexism and to do all they can to help students to become aware. The following are some suggestions to guide English teachers to extend their goals and to take steps to eliminate sexism from the English classroom, to promote reasonable change, to assure equal treatment of persons as individuals in the study of language and literature.

English teachers should help students to:

1. Choose language carefully and purposely to avoid sexist terms.
2. See people as human beings, whether male or female, and value human qualities such as strength, courage, gentleness, and responsibility without role typing.
3. Understand how sexist language and concepts can influence behavior, distort reality, and limit human potential.
4. Perceive traditional values, contributions of both males and females to society, and changes in roles through literature and discussion.
5. Become more sensitive to their own attitudes and the attitudes of others.

Definition of Sexism

Originally the word sexism meant bias against the female sex. It is now used to indicate any stereotyping of males or females on the basis of their sex alone. Sexism then includes labeling, grouping, addressing people in such a way as to reinforce roles, stereotypes that females will behave in certain ways and males will behave in others (girls will be cooperative; boys will be noisy). It can appear not only in literature, student writing, class discussions, but also in bulletin board materials, teacher speech and behavior, language exercises, and all activities of the English classroom. Anything which arbitrarily restricts human behavior to male or female stereotypes without regard for human potential is sexism.

Language

Language is the means of thinking and expressing thoughts. It therefore plays a major role in perpetuating sexism. Because English offers a wealth of expression, it is not necessary to use sexist terms. The following are ways that language works to perpetuate sexism:

1. People are assigned to roles according to sex: females are telephone operators, secretaries; men are doctors, lawyers, engineers. Females are gentle, secretive, passive; males are aggressive, strong, logical.

All persons should be eligible for the full range of human behavior, good and bad, professional and non-professional. No one should be assigned a job or role on the basis of sex alone.

2. People are limited in feeling and behavior because of sex-role expectations. Females are portrayed as illogical, flighty, weak; men are shown as ruthless, or henpecked. Girls do not play soccer; men do not decorate.

   Both sexes have the same range of emotional responses and potentials. Both should be allowed their feelings without being categorized as "unfeminine" or "unmasculine".

3. People are sterotyped in negative role models: women are shrews, harlots, timid creatures; men are brutes or henpecked husbands. Sex markers are used to demean persons: A womanish man, a mannish woman, sissified, weak sister, etc.

4. People are not designated as persons in their own right or are not treated equally because of sex differentiation: Jerry's wife or Betty's husband. Mr. Carter is a successful engineer, and his wife is a beautiful blonde.

   Persons should be called by their own names and described in like manner regardless of sex. Jerry Ford and Betty Ford; Mr. Carter is a handsome brunette, and Mrs. Carter is a beautiful blonde/Mr. Carter is a successful engineer, and Mrs. Carter is an accomplished sculptor.

5. People are demeaned by sex identity and marital terms: My girl (adult female) will do the typing; my boy (adult male, infrequently used now) will drive for you; the little woman will come with us; my old man will be with me. She is a lady lawyer; he is a male secretary.

   Persons should be addressed with and treated with dignity. Adult females are women, not girls. Lawyers, doctors, poets, actors are professional titles which should apply to both sexes. (Feminine markers -ess are often confused with the diminutive and imply a lesser standing.)

6. People often misinterpret the widespread use of "man" and the masculine pronoun "he" as implying a masculine designation rather than a generic one applying to both sexes. Most times when people use "man" or "he" they do indeed mean a male. Such usage subtly excludes women from consideration for many jobs and roles and limits their own expectations.

   Persons should be included rather than excluded in all instances possible. Using reasonable substitutes for masculine generic terms avoids this problem and may help to change society: scientists rather than men of science; ancestors for forefathers; chair, chairperson, or chaired by for chairman.

   Use of the plural, rewording to avoid pronouns, alternating masculine and feminine are some ways to eliminate the masculine pronoun and its sexist implications: The average American enjoys

work rather than the average man enjoys his work.

NOTE: A supplementary list of terms to be avoided or used with care appears at the end of the guidelines.

Exercises and Applications

Here are a number of ways that students can become more aware of sex bias in society and in their own speaking, thinking, and writing. Students can:

1. List a number of occupations and give the list as a test to other students: Without thinking, as fast as possible, write down M for male and F for female after each category.
2. Examine advertisements in newspapers and magazines to determine sex bias and denigration of males or females for advertising purposes.
3. Scan newspaper articles for unequal treatment of sexes in reporting.
4. Analyze grammar texts for sentences which reinforce stereotypes and role expectations; rewrite the sentences to avoid sexism.
5. Investigate children's games, books, toys for evidence of sex role expectations.
6. Survey "junk" mail practices and report to the class.
7. Monitor television programs and report stereotyping, expecially commercials.

Literature

Literature has a multiple and important function in English classrooms and in society. Besides improving reading skills and providing information, it provides an insight into the values, functioning, mores of society. It also influences thinking and behavior. There is a great deal of evidence to indicate that literature in textbooks particularly portrays males and females, but especially females, unrealistically and perpetuates sex role stereotyping.

The English teacher has a responsibility to help students to examine literature critically in regard to sex stereotyping as well as other aspects. The teacher also has an opportunity to provide a balance of materials so that students "discover" female authors (too often underrepresented in collections and anthologies), balanced female characters, male authors who write sympathetically about women and men, characters with the full range of human feelings and behaviors.

Here are some of the ways that literature works to perpetuate sexism:

1. Many characters are stereotyped in sex roles: Women are passive, submissive, selfless or vixenish, domineering, malicious. (Lucie Manette or Madame De Fargo) Men are heroic, brave, strong (Achilles) or cruel and ruthless (Creon) or weak and ineffectual (Walter Mitty)
2. Literary allusions perpetuate sex role stereotypes: Cassandra, Penelope, Hercules
3. Few female writers have appeared in "traditional" textbooks; fewer female characters have been portrayed than male characters.
4. Generic terms have been used traditionally for titles, chapter

heads, designations of conflict and theme: Man versus man, man and his world.

Teachers will not want to reject works or authors of merit because they portray sex-stereotyped characters or sexist ideas. But they may devise exercises and methods for analyzing these materials and providing a balanced point of view for students.

Exercises and Applications

Here are a number of ways that students can become more aware of sex bias in literature and of the influence that it may have on human potential. Students may:

1. Find additional stories, poems, essays by and about females to balance class materials which have a dearth of these.
2. Develop questions and guidelines which can be used to analyze a work of literature for sexist bias or role stereotyping (see list at end).
3. Select alternative terms for Man versus Nature and other such traditional ones
4. Analyze reading materials for sexist content, language, stereotypical characters.
5. Discuss what determines masculinity/femininity in a character or a person.
6. Rewrite passages to reverse roles or change stereotyping.
7. Parody passages to accentuate sexism and satirize it.
8. Use cartoons, or collages to depict graphically sex stereotyping.

Here is a check-list which students may modify to suit their needs in analyzing literature for sexist content:

1. What is considered acceptable behavior for males and females in the setting of the work?
2. Are these standards different from those of the present?
3. Are the characters, especially female ones, narrow or multidimensional?
4. What problems do the characters face? Are these stereotyped by sex?
5. How do the characters meet these problems? Are their responses limited by sex roles?
6. Are the characters positive or negative? Realistic or unrealistic? Do they have positive or negative self-images?
7. If the roles are traditional, do they give strong, positive images of these roles?
8. What seems to be the intent of the author in these portrayals?
9. Are the characters convincing? Why or why not?
10. Have males or females been omitted from the work? Is this omission necessary?

The following lists are samples of terms that are often used and are often sexist in nature or use. These should be examinied critically in any context to avoid stereotyping.

Nouns and Alternatives

man (generic)--person, human being, people, men and women
forefathers--ancestors, forerunners
man power--human energy
middleman--liaison, go-betweer
righthand man, girl Friday, gal, boy--assistant, helper
chairman, chairwoman--chair, chairperson, chaired by
fireman, policeman, salesman--firefighter, police officer
authoress, poetess, heiress--author, poet, heir
Congressman, Congresswoman--member of Congress, Representative
lady doctor, male nurse--doctor, nurse
the fair sex, the weaker sex--women
the distaff side, the little woman, the ball and chain, the old lady--wife
the old man--husband
girls, gals, ladies--women
men and girls--men and women
libber--feminist, liberationist
chick, fox, bird, dame, broad, babe, doll, dish, cookie, tomato, peach, cookie, sugar--woman
stud, jock, weaksister, sissy, fag--man
old maid, spinster--unmarried person
submissive wife, henpecked husband, dominating wife, bitch, battle axe, man's prey, sex object, the "mom", the angel, mother, the seductress, goddess

Adjectives and Alternatives (Traditionally feminine; traditionally masculine)

hysterical; outraged--angry
domineering; virile--forceful
scatterbrained; absentminded--forgetful
ladylike; gentlemanly--polite, considerate
sexy; manly
petite; puny
perky; brave
flighty; organized
winsome; aggressive
nosy; analytical
dizzy; reliable
buxom; athletic
voluptuous; worldly
vivacious; adventurous
catty; rational
silly; sensible, stable
womanish, spinsterish; old ladyish
mannish; womanish, sissified
charming; tough
gentle, delicate, frustrated, attractive, delightful, emotional, passive